

The Present

"Vot a lucky boy! The birthday boy!"

"You never mind who's a lucky boy or who's not a lucky boy!" his grandfather informed the old man. He wondered how this tattered bum even knew about his birthday. Then his grandfather announced: "This is who Gramps told you about! Your present!" immediately beating the other man around the head and shoulders. "You too!" he screamed. "Smack him good!"

The boy whaled away, but only could reach midway up the black overcoat, which shredded and unbuttoned as he pounded. He scraped across a greenish brass beltbuckle and quit, but the grandfather persisted until out of breath, then stuck a ten dollar bill in the beaten old man's overcoat pocket.

With the boy watching from the window, the old man staggered down the porch stairs, pausing at the blinding sidewalk to extract the money. The pocket came out with it, disintegrating into a purple dust as the old man squinted.

Meanwhile the chortling and puffing Gramps was dancing, reliving in exaggerated form some of his punches.

"Grandfather, will there always be Nazis?" "Yes!" he windmilled, scarlet, "and always us here to bop them good!" Gramps stopped to place a bony hand on his shoulder. "But look," he panted, noticing the few dots of blood on the boy's frail knuckles, "let's patch that up you know your father and mother."

Little Candles

"It's simple. It's selfish. You help others and it makes you feel good. You do it for yourself really," shrugged Rebecca, a diminutive redhead pouring coffee into a mug. "Hey, I don't catapult out of here to a bar every Friday now."

The lanky Gerry bit her lip. "Well I'm afraid to miss my Aerobics. It's Jeannette the instructor. She whines if somebody doesn't show up. Holy God when I think of it, everybody's a terrorist in my life!" She twisted the string around her tea bag to coax a few more drops into the styrofoam cup. They dented her reflected face in the middle of luxuriant chestnut hair. "I do their will!" she looked up from the tea at Rebecca "to prevent emotional catastrophe! My...mother comes to mind. Her will be done or watch it!"

So, anyway, at any rate, after Aerobics and before Trevor I can give up an hour or two. So I will come--but I won't like it. My life is busy enough, cowardly though it be." They sat side by side now, atop a cluttered desk.

"What's Trevor like?" asked Rebecca. "You have thirty seconds before my boss arrives. He's young and tries to make sure breaks are precisely timed."

Gerry couldn't reply at first, but then sputtered "He...owns things. Every time I see him he owns some more. Always the best quality and something that does...more somehow. I have a little CD player but he has one where five or so discs sit on a sort of round thing, turntable" Gerry put down her tea and stirred a hand in the overheated air as copy machines shuffle-thumped in the

room behind them"and ...this turntable clicks around or something depending on how you clap your hands." She clapped her long hands in wonderment. "Does that sound right?"

"Yeah, but he can't be that much of an asshole," answered Rebecca, staring ahead.

"Well he's nice from what I can tell. I've never been out with him before but he's been in my company a few times--double dates or just a gang of the girls meeting him and some guys."

"I don't want any more of that." Rebecca was shaking her head, the thin red hair vibrant in harsh florescent light. "I'm running out of time."

"To get married?"

"To get anything. I can't do any more of those Gulags."

"That desperate?" laughed Gerry. They had been looking out the window at gray rainblackened trees being shaken for the last of their foliage but turned to each other now.

"I guess I've read all the wrong magazines and books--self-help, new-wave, you name it." Rebecca affected a visionary face. "Hey! If they'd said to smear my tits with lard and watch the men pant around, I'd do it. Well I wouldn't now. I don't do anything anymore. I don't have to. I help people who piss their pants, those far, far less-than-zeros to the Trevors of the world. And you know? It's the best thing I've ever done: I can be myself and nobody cares what I wear." Rebecca smoothed down her miniskirt.

"You always look nice, so petite." Gerry said. "Whereas I sort of lumber."

"Uh uh. It's okay for you to be yourself in any situation because you're tall and pretty. Well...beautiful it pains me to say. Whereas! Well let's face it, I'm a halfpint and...well what my mother's girlfriends call plain. Oh I do have this natural mole and thoughtful dimples which drill in when I'm quizzical and can't fuckin decide anything." She pushed a short finger into her cheek. "Then all of life goes by, smiling through its asshole and carrying a whole bushel of self-help books." Gerry laughed lightly as Rebecca went on to demonstrate the dimples. "I fake them really, only piquant factor I got going, by sort of s-ucking in my cheeks like this, see? Chipmunk style. I can become *dangerously* cute! Any men around? Hate to waste this."

"Shouldn't I gather some?" Gerry flicked her chestnut hair in the direction of the inner offices.

"With you here it's a wonder they're all not sucking around

already," Rebecca said, bending her bare knees inward as if to make herself smaller.

"They...won't get too religious on us and the unfortunates at this soup kitchen or whatever it's called, will they?" Gerry inquired, sliding forward to the edge of the desk.

"Don't worry. Hell, I was born Catholic but don't believe a thing they say. Anyway, you'll like Sister Lucy. She's the one I promised her I'd bring along another warm body tonight--if you can understand the alleged English of that. And believe it or not she likes a raunchy story if you can get her to sit still and listen. Actually she reminds me of my father in that way. He was a church organist who carried a portable one around with him--a lay church organist. After he finally left, Mom took to watching this show *The Christophers*, where they said it's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness, you know? So that's what I do--the darkness is the area without a boyfriend."

"Well I'm in darkness and a Presbyterian to boot." Gerry drained her tea with exaggeration.

"It's okay, the bums won't care. Mother became a Baptist. They deal with drunks better--she's also a drunk. The Baptists got her into a home with biblebeating souses destroying each others' ears. Thus have they made of their hell a paradise!"

Gerry, still perched on the very edge of the desk, pondered that comment with a wry smile and crossed her long legs, a balancing trick considering her position. Next to her, little Rebecca crossed hers a short beat afterwards as if they formed a kind of show business act.

When Gerry got to the shelter's dining room that early evening,

a regal if frail black man appeared in his underwear and as quickly exited when Rebecca came out from the kitchen, her red hair frazzled in the middle of a cloud of steam. "Hi! That was Mr Chostermill Loony Tunes and Merrie Melodies." She whirled a small hand around her head.

Gerry waved her own trembling arm to indicate the scruffy room full of long tables covered in oil cloth. "Not, uh, quite the office."

"Hey Mr Chostermill is at least interesting, whereas all the people around us in that office are vapid bores. Even in my old place, deadly though it was, I at least had a hot affair," Rebecca whispered, placing a hand on Gerry's shoulder and staring up into her eyes with mock gravity.

"You never told me." Gerry, too, was whispering, but then Rebecca spoke out in a quite audible voice as individual men sidled in and sat at the tables.

"Yeah it was with Paper Cups, that's what I called him. Life and death struggles about paper cups! He was honcho for that stupid part of the entire stupid operation. Married man would you believe?" Rebecca attempted to arrange her steamed hair with her hands. "Perhaps I'm expiating that part of it with this charity so-called." Her qualifer cued a bag lady to stagger in from the street and plop herself and accessories down in the middle of the floor. "Anyway he had to choose finally between the wife and me and paper cups. You know what he decided, and we both threw him out therefore. And then the company threw him out too. Even paper cups betrayed him. We meet for lunch sometimes, wife and me--always in a fancy restaurant where we go dutch, appropriately enough, and don't run the risk of any paper cups." The bag lady snored. "That...was miraculously fast," remarked Gerry, her profusion of hair and her slimness noted even by the half-aware bums waiting at their tables.

"Just Madame. Madame Marta!" Rebecca yelled abruptly.

Madame's eyelids shot up in a nest of several coat sweaters.

"Germans took it, Russians took it," she sobbed.

Mr Chostermill re-entered, still in his underwear. "Her home,"

he explained. "That Europe is the god-awfulest place," he confided

to Gerry. "Even worse than this."

Sister Lucy materialized from the kitchen, tiny and darkeyed, wearing a sort of army shirt over her habit, wiping her reddened hands on an apron. "I don't think we need your help on this one, Mr Chostermill," she informed him, but he didn't hear her, or anything, for he had lapsed into a wall-eyed gaze.

Introductions were made and Sister Lucy asked Rebecca to deal with Madame Marta, and Gerry to help Mr Chostermill find some clothes. "He...looks dead." Gerry gasped. It was as if a fine gray net had descended on ebony Mr Chostermill.

"Just a few million more brain cells checking out," Rebecca was chuckling. "He'll snap to."

He did and they're soon at his locker in a dank dormitory room.

The inside of the door holds a pinup of Betty Grable in bathing suit and heels, standing by a silvery airplane inclined towards deepest blue sky. Her head is twisted round to glance over a

pink and creamy shoulder, under which her rear resembles a plump inverted heart of salmon red. Gerry spies one pair of trousers and one shirt hanging in the locker, both crisp and clean in steel-gray light. "Let's see-eeeeee now," Mr Chostermill ponders what to wear.

Choice generally presents itself along a wider front to Trevor Tressor. He has of course many more than one pair of trousers and one shirt, but just one creamy Alfa Romeo, and, alas, one Macintosh Computer sans color. At the restaurant he dwells on this particular lack until Gerry worms in her experience with Mr Chostermill, growing uncharacteristically excited when speaking too of Rebecca and Sister Lucy and Madame Marta and the crushed men who came in to eat.

"I don't know what I was thinking of when I bought it!" Trevor must explain when she stops to breathe. He is tall, nearly cadaverous, and the immense sockets holding his dishwater eyes darken in defeat.

"What's the problem? You want color, you get color!" she very nearly shouts at him. He peers at her with melancholy, stung by her insensitivity to his misstep in consumption. It seems at this point that all eyes in the Turkish restaurant rest on them, but as she lifts a sesame cracker dipped in hummus to her mouth she quickly fears that the crowded room is attentive only because her hands smell vaguely of urine, and she visualizes her last task at the shelter, sorting laundry with Sister Lucy.

She had rushed to wash them in her own bathroom, before the punctual Trevor came, but a perfumed liquid soap called SO-OHHH SUBTLE! proved not up to life that particular day.

The restaurant is a converted gas station and the metal locker in the Ladies' Room fortunately proves to be not merely a prop, still containing the gritty powdered soap of the mechanic. She likes the pain of washing with it while making faces in mirror imitating her instructor Jeanette, the aeroic whiner, and Trevor.

"PRINcess of Sweat!" she announces finally, "you must get to meet the...Hamlet of the Consumer Culture!"

While putting back the box of soap and slamming the metal door she sighs "Oh gee Mr Chostermill I want your choices! Marry me, sexy Chostermill! I'll get my own shirt and pants and throw everything else away! All the shit I've surrounded myself with, so I can keep working to buy more of it. SO-OHHH SUBTLE my ass! Made, created especially for advertising. No wonder it's lousy--like everything else in this country. Insane!" But

she's feeling guilty about making fun of Trevor since he seems decent enough. "Trev," she whispers, turning away from the locker, "there's got to be more to you, but for some reason I'm just not seeing it because that sexy, wily old Chostermill is seizing my attention with his dying brain! Old, dark hypnotist!"

Gerry returns to sit opposite an enormously fat, caramel-colored man studying the tall menu. She babbles "I know it's the last thing you want to hear, Trev, but I've got to talk more about what I did today. It was just a couple of hours or so but..." She looks up a few minutes later, breathless, expecting to see Trevor's bored, heavy-lidded eyes. Instead the moon-faced man with goldrimmed glasses explains "You must forgive me for letting you go on. I lost my wife recently and you're so like her in your fresh loveliness and vitality and enthusiasm--I feel uplifted, honest to God! I came here just wanting to stuff my face and get a little drunk." She mutters something she instantly forgets, and there's suddenly Trevor to escort her back to their table, like a patient who had wandered away from the ward.

He, of course, knows what *she* needs, and it surely isn't helping negroes in slums or restaurants; she, of course, wants to get out of there fast, so he stuffs a breadstick in his mouth.

Something quickens in her during the ride to her apartment, the only sound the spin of the wet tires, and her lungs all but burst while bolting from his car after she had bit off "Thank you and I'm really sorry for the--" Her hair flies back red and black in the faint, dappled light of a streetlamp in the midst of lurching, skeletal trees.

Sister Lucy answers on the first ring and Gerry unleashes a tenminute flurry ending with "Do you have to be a Catholic? I must be going crazy! But what I do in that office is so awful and so useless. Oh I am such a little asskisser! Where is my life? I mean I think it's somewhere but I can't find it! Oh I know this all sounds addled and schoolgirlish to you! But I just had to, was compelled to--"

She goes on a few moments more before Sister Lucy yells "Whoa there! I'm sure as hell not Mother Teresa and neither are you. Well I shouldn't say that about you. We don't know about you yet."

Gerry begins sobbing and then gasps "Well I better hang up...I'm sor--" "Hold on, Woman! I didn't say we couldn't talk about other things. There are a lot of them, no? Life

isn't just the shelter thank the Lord! Say anything. You just want to talk is all. Don't worry, I've felt that way. We all have."

Hours later she removes the soaking receiver from her ear, hardly remembering anything she had said, only that she had to promise Sister Lucy not to come to the shelter until a week elapses. "Wired as you are tonight" sighed Sister, "you'd exhaust us all. But most of all, Gerry, I sense what we call a honeymoon. That's when people get all benign and moony and want to save humankind right after their own

canonization is instantly declared. Whereas I worry not about my future sainthood or bringing humanity up to snuff in the next ten minutes, but where my next meal is coming from, or rather where my next thousand meals are coming from for the shelter. I'm talking about the grit of this business and the grease of politics. And...well, much begging in addition--what seems the basest part to most people is really the easiest."

"I wouldn't mind begging!" Gerry had pleaded. "I'd much prefer it to shoving away the hands of every sleazebag manager I've every worked with."

When I say anything at all I always say too much, she whispers

into a dawn filtering through the many front window panes as pinkgray as the inside of a seashell. Her eyes burning and her hair matted next to her soaking ear, she becomes aghast at how long she had talked to Sister Lucy.

"Shit no I'm not going to bed!" she exclaims as if a judiciousperson had suggested it. "Wasting my life that way too! Usually to sleep away depression. At least tonight'll be different. She ends up going through old music albums, sorts them into piles after flicking off the lights because of the glare on the album covers. *They fell to drugs* was one category...*they fell from fame and strangled in middleclass life*, another.

"But it's normal life," she sobs. "What's wrong with it? It's what everybody gets! Whereas I'm ravening around my apartment in the middle of the night like a mad woman!"

These fell from fame and became assholes! It comes to us all. "Yeah? Well not me. I'm getting out of this Gulag somehow!"

She ultimately falls asleep atop the albums, wakes up trembling and frightened, and then puts on a heavy, musty sweater. "Am I of any use?" she asks, staring up at an airplane, its red and blue running lights sliding along the pinkish sky. "Hey, Betty

Grable! I've got a nice ass too, she giggles, shaped just right if short on substance. I try to keep it to myself, although I'd like to use it in my arsenal of lovin' tools, Betty Grable, but oh the cost is so so high, to say nothing of all the bullshit you have to listen to. Did I tell Sister too much, Betty? I'm feeling too ashamed to see her again.

And honeymoon is such a curious word, Betty, don't you agree? What kind of honeymoon could you have with bag ladies and frail, frail tramps?"

The plane gone, a few stars still shimmer through the dawn sky. She goes into the bathroom to note in the lighted mirror her cavedineyes and wild hair: *You! So that's what a saint looks like? Shit you're no saint! That's for sure!*

"I don't care what I am I'm going to be better!" she exclaims aloud.

Read that in a selfhelp book did you? Any more little mottos?

"There could be."

Gerry, you're just a phoney, going here and there whenever anyone asks or yells. You never had a fuckin thought before! What'd you use your head for? She is hitting it.

The next moment she's slumping onto a sofa. "Go away all you thoughts now! I'm no saint and I don't have the verve to be a sinner either. Is it written, verily, that there there must be a Mr Paper Cups in my future?" she sighs. And she sees one, pudgy and benign, leaning back towards a backyard where kids play in and out of barbecue smoke, and wife stretches out in a chaise lounge, smoking, picking a shred of tobacco from her upper lip.

She shakes loose that domestic image only to see the women who run around her neighborhood Acme Market around dinnertime for something, anything, to microwave for the family: their tailored looks and drawn faces...and claws of hands.

"Sister said that happiness is a byproduct. Where's their happiness? The byproducts are in the meat they buy in those flat, frosted packages."

She rises from the sofa. "Compulsion be dammed, hey Mr Chostermill and Madame Marta and Sister Lucy and Rebecca! We'll hold hands and dance in our own crazy circle, the rising smell of pisskeeping all the respectable people away, all the walking-dead women in their drycleaned suits and cellular phones, all the Mr Paper Cups wanting to use me to dirty up their pallid lives." Gerry dances in the dim apartment.

Later, she wonders if Sister Lucy will eventually let her stay, and how long and how far to take the religion of the thing. "I'm really not anything along that line..." she remembers telling Sister Lucy. "I was brought up Presbyterian, sort of. I...just don't know..."

"You don't know much of anything do you?" Her own voice startles her, standing close to a window and watching her haggard face in one rosy pane.

Gerry goes to a closet to get the jacket she uses on solo hikes, crushes it to her face to smell the woodsmoke and dry leaves.

"J. C. he said something like you have no mother or something, or let the dead bury the dead? Well I have no mother or boss or aerobics witch or state-of-the-art gentleman caller."

She looks out on the empty street, a sheet of newspaper dancing fitfully, and imagines the lonely men lining up for breakfast at the shelter, this same newspaper wrapping around a straggler's legs as Marta Marta, affrighted out from cluttered sleep, keen to them of her lost European home.

Stepping back, she notes her image repeated in the numerous panes; flickering, each, as a draft comes through the apartment. Puts on the jacket and massages her taut neck; then, for some reason, she laughs uproariously, eyes marvelously cool. "You are little, Sister Lucy. You can't hold me out! And don't you die, Mr Chostermill, at least not in the next hour or so!" She buttons up the jacket, rips a ski cap from a pocket.

Word

Flashes of chrome stab a sullen yellow light, and purple clouds mass behind a sudden pair of boys skidding BMX bikes to all but pin another boy to the chain-link fence he has rested his own BMX against. "Bad machine," compliments the larger one, his face and hands

Oriental in that odd light, though he's a freckled redhead.

"Word!" adds the smaller one to underline his companion's appraisal. Below, traffic thunders while merging onto the highway, and the lone boy suddenly feels the fence vibrating against his back as he engages in the compulsory sneaker check with them--identical brands and models, dirty hightops with laces undone.

"You just move in dead Harry's?" Vapor curls from the larger one's mouth.

"I guess."

"He guesses," spits the small one into ash-gold weeds. "So why don't you know?" The two inquisitors straddle their bikes, the smaller one leaning far to one side.

"Anytime, buck each, no shit!" The big one is pointing to the large silver bottlecaps laced through both wheels of this new boy's bike. A local brewery had attempted to promote a sort of carafe with a flat cap but couldn't get the seal to hold.

"No big deal. My father give em to--"

"Where you come from?" The big boy interrupts.

"Parkside."

"Stupid neighborhood. Why move here? From Parkside to River Edge. Just as stupid."

"Word!"-- again this intensifier from the small one who shifts from side to side, his bike frame too tall for him.

"My parents. My father mostly. He likes to...move."

"Move? Yuppies and faggots move up to The Heights in Parkside.

The faggots fix up all the old houses. You move in there and you get fuckin AIDS!" gushes this small one. A few drops of rain whip at them and darkened Burger King napkins flap around

and are sucked into the fence as trucks hiss below. "We lived there with my real father before all the fags. He was Italian or something. What a slum!"

We lived there with my real father."

"Shrimp always tells everybody too much."

"Fuck you!" Shrimp's vehemence shocks the new boy but the other

laughs, and then abruptly whispers "You ride with us?"

"I don't know."

"Come onnnnnn!" this bigger one coaxes, his red hair raised up like a fan from the dark wind, the stretching intonation meaning *just for now, it's no big deal, nothing to lose*. "We're gonna go back of Shop Rite. It's bad! There's a blueberry pie, I know." "Word! You *should* know," adds Shrimp, delighted. He has leveled his bike, his toes barely touching the pavement.

"He means I smashed it in yesterday with my mother so they'd throw it out today. She goes: *Will you hurry up? Why are you lingering? Rah-AN-dol-uph!* She's hollering at me and I'm shoving in that fuckin pie box good!"

"Lingering!" the redhead and Shrimp squeal it together, an old joke, and then repeat it several times, both nearly tipping over in their mirth, but the new boy doesn't join in.

Instead, "Randolph?" he smirks, stepping towards them, a quick shaft of weakened sunlight skimming the spokes of the bikes and highlighting the bottlecaps on his wheels.

"Rocks! call me."

"I'm Badger," he invents, having an uncle who helped train some of the Wisconsin football team offseason in his health club.

"My new mother don't 'llow no nicknames!" Shrimp winces as if awaiting her punishment. The light darkens abruptly on their faces as the luminous rim around the thunderheads narrows.

"He's Shrimp but near his house, Victor-Emmanuel--that's some emperor in whatchacallit, Pizza-Pigout-Land or someplace. The new boy laughs and Shrimp reddens instantly, dropping his bike,

both hands soon in a flurry grazing them: "I'll get you both for that!" The older boys take the scant threat in good grace. Below, there's a lull in traffic with just the occasional wheeze of airbrakes.

"Hey Badger, was that lady crying your mother?" Shrimp couldn't wait for a reply to his big friend's question. "You'll get divorced, we got divorced," he sped.

"She always cries. We don't take it serious," shrugs Badger.

"Hey, mom's cry. They all do," affirms Shrimp. "I've had a bunch."

"Word!" Rocks agrees. "Mine yells a lot more, but she cries too."

"The same broken tiles like our last house? That's why I left. They were just talking and talking and talking about them, these fuckin tiles. They wouldn't stop," he shrugs again. "It's crazy! Mom sitting in the tub ripping tiles left and..." Badger stops; he is saying too much.

Rocks nods. "Yeah they get off on little shit like that and then they go on fuckinforever!"

"Word! Yeah, parents. They never know when to fuckin stop talking," Shrimp underscores, vapors rushing from his mouth and hanging in the darkening air, "Was that asshole your father, one trying to fix garage door? He goes: *one more minute and then I rip the fuckin thing off its...* whatchacallits?" Shrimp is almost dancing, spit flying with his breeaths.

"Hinges," Rocks injects.

"Word!" Shrimp becomes hysterically emboldened, his real voice hopping a wet octave before diving into imitation: "I thought I'd shit! He goes!: *Had it fuckin right fuckin minute ago!*"

But his basso version of Badger's angry father cracks towards the breathless, squeaky last, and now the three boys comprise a kind ofmenacing field within the heavy air as Badger moves ever so slowly towards Shrimp, and Rocks dismounts. "What shakes with this 'asshole' bullshit?" Badger snaps at both of them, knowing that no one can call your father that until you do first, that it's a rule everywhere.

Shrimp drains of color and Rocks steps aside as Badger approaches. The light becomes a dirty yellow flicker among them. Below, trucks shoulder in a leemony glow.

Rocks blurts "He don't mean it in a bad way. We all call our fathers ass--"

Shrimp backs away, and then scrambles onto his bike. "Yeah! Honest! Word! I got two and they're both...assholes!" Badger yanks him off the bike which jumps forward a bit and falls to the ground, its front wheel revolving slowly. Shrimp's head is forced down into Badger's crotch.

"Stop you fuckin faggot!" Shrimp screams.

Badger releases him. "What you so nervous for? Next time I'll let you kiss it!"

"I don't go for no shit like that!"

"Not yet, huh?" The three boys are scarlet as Randolph steps gingerly between the other two.

"Shit! Badger," he whispers. "We never get that fuckin

mad! They must all be crazy in Parkside."

They stare at their sneaks in the amplified highway noise and don't know how to part. When the two larger boys finally look up, they see tears in Shrimp's eyes, his lip trembling as the sun breaks through suddenly. "Some..." he starts whispering, "some people take a bath once in a while!"

"He will when he gets his old lady out of the bathtub!" Rocks yells and they all laugh, though Badger, his heart beating furiously, joins in late. In the brightness, Rocks' greenish teeth unsettle him further.

Behind the dumpster at Shop Rite, they have eaten the smashed blueberry pie and flaunt their blue hands, then perform sticky high fives.

"What'll we call ourselves?" pops Shrimp.

"Three From Hell!" Badger screams, leaping on his bike, leading them past the loading docks to careen down the driveway and onto the sunny street in shrieking, breathless giggles.

Buster Ianucci is shocked into flattening the trajectory of a blackened cabbage. It thumps the side of the dumpster. "You hear all that noise? There are women out there!" he informs Lucy Devaney, meat department apprentice. "They want my rotten cucumber!" Swathed in rubber rain gear several sizes too big, she is hosing down the platform. Deep inside of all that yellow her violet eyes hunger as she plays the hose on Buster, forcing him back into the store.

Avia Morrisey

1) What the hell's the difference what I do? They froze me out of promotion and I'm finished! Where I have the means I'll help you, where I don't I won't, so I'm sending you to Colgate. You may have wanted to go somewhere else, I don't know, but that's where I'm sending you. And don't...oh I can't talk to women since your mother died. Well, anyway,

don't...well, be careful, if you do, uh do, uh what...uhanyway, be a nurse or something.

2) *Ah, love let us be true to one another!*

3) So she left me to screw some GreaseBum, my Mother! Can you visualize it, them sliding around the greasy sheets?

4) Gee you're smart in most ways but in that way you're retarded.

5) Honey they send you right place. If you change, you betta fast! If you don't, you bettah bettah stay same! Down here, everythings go so down, even sex don't help none down here.

6) *Madonna oda wombah blundada.*

7) NO RECORDS EXIST FOR THE AFORENAMED OFFICER

8) *Wombah blundada automatique!*

9) *Madonna ada wombah blundada! Saintah Saintah! 10)*

MITZIHINKUH!KUH!KUH!

NOTES

1) From phone conversation, Captain Brandon Morrisey, United States Navy, about to be retired.

2) Matthew Arnold, and unnamed literature instructor, who, allusioncrammed, couldn't erect at critical juncture. For Avia, no critical juncture.

3) Avia couldn't visualize.

4) Again, Lucy Eccles, roommate.

5) Mona Many, drunken nurse in Susseluhland who served The Gentle People. Drove a Jawa motorcycle even more battered.

6) The madonna with the wooden dick. Reference to the crude machine of monkeywood Avia cranked up with a galonnashell handle in order to demonstrate The Rubber to Susseluhland women as blank as she.

7) Morrisey, his captain's hat cocked, died at halftime in the bar of the Naval Officers' Club in San Diego after repetitively shouting "Go Army!" Army went on to lose 167. Since only the navy knew they were related, and it lost him, Avia was never notified of his decease. (Small estate ended up at BideaBit, where he had been drying out as she graduated Colgate in Public Health.)

8) In a moonswept clearing on an achingly gorgeous evening the machine very slowly elevated itself as Avia slept. Thereafter an entourage moaned after her on her roundsscattered frequently by the careening Mona Many on her rusty Jawa. (The *automatique* is a linguistic remnant from a French occupation from 1884191

9) The madonna *without* the wooden dick! A double saint! What The BurningPatch People screamed as they rushed by her to throw themselves into the volcano. Had viciously elbowed aside The Gentle People along with their obscenityspouting nurse, sans defunct cycle. Had been forcing Avia up and up the burning slope, their charred sores smoking. When it seemed they would hurl her in, she flung away the ascension device and huge prophylactic. Despite the flareup of sulphurous fumes, it proved the right thing.

10) Exclaim today's young women after conferring for hours on end in her hammock with Saintah Saintah Avia. (A gutteral fricativeclick spit: most tortured outcry of Susseluhlandian sexual frustration.)

The Ceremony

Resembling a crowbar, the purple strip lurks in the low sky. Sharp crunching...then heel-strikes as she finds the path. Shortly he sees the vapor preceding her, the gloom behind pierced by streetlamps around which snow revolves.

When he can discern her clothes he comments, *Well you're certainly equipped for the task at hand!*

I couldn't get back to the apartment to change.

Still the party animal, hey?

You could say that. Her eyes blank in the dimness.

Well, at any rate, I'm glad you came, he says, this might have to be the last until the Spring thaw.

Glad? Never heard you use such an odd word. Have you gone crazy? A wet flake flops into her hair.

It must have hurt I mean for you to leave the party without a stranger.

Oh? Still the jealous male? My my! But let me offer a discrete hallelujah: no prying bitty little questions this time--oh so very manipulative with their subtle, softest poisons. You're at least over that.

Time, he shrugs in whispering snow, the cure and the kill.

Oh yeah? Well I'm trying to accept kill, because then hope is dead. And yet, here we are once more. Stupid. We're hopeless.

Absently, he turns a hand up as if to cup the sifting snow. You never know. And when you finally do it's too late.

Well I hope modestly, not universally that this is the last, the woman sighs.

He had fetched the tools from a car trunk as frigid as Siberia, keeps the shovel and gives her the crowbar. They look for the right place to start, the hard ground beginning to whiten.

Almost as an antidote to their sniping, they dig a half hour without speaking, gulping in icy needles of air and panting out dark vapors.

Soon they have dugs, though unsteady on her heels, thrusting in with the crowbar, and he scraping away the clods with the shovel just enough to reveal the larger outline below them: its hair frostwhorls into which individual giant flakes drift.

A...little more, he encourages--spasmodic puffs from his mouth darkly surrounding his head.

She demurs, leaning on her crowbar. C'mon now, don't be a fuss...budget in this too! she gasps.

But he wins. Listen this once! Just not enough...depth to really operate, really know when you're...striking home!

They again dig in the odors of frozen mud and lye, she sobbing with each thrust, the snow arriving now in stinging, surging waves.

I'll change. If you want to change. She blinks away the tears as he offers the shovel. So they reverse roles, he driving and twisting in with the crowbar, more deeply than she could, and she, beyond herself, jerkily scooping up after him.

The depth of the exposed form is right, they silently agree. Much more would exhaust the energy needed now, especially as the wind has begun raging, slamming icy snow into them and whirling it round the declivities of the uncovered thing below.

The tools are dropped, clattering away along the ground as the couple falls down on the form, their beating fists producing a dull, echoing hollowness. On they go far past exhaustion into a loathsome nightmare of sweat and icy slime.

As the thumps become less and less audible to them, they are retching. Then, the grating draughts after they have, finally, stopped. After some moments they clamber up from out of the grave.

In the fastticking hail, she on her knees and he above, hulking: the whole scene looking like some Medieval ceremony, swarthy knight and weeping maiden. Below, with matted hair aswirl in flowers of blackest ice, the horse.

Operation Dessert Form

We're best at two things as a nation. One is ultimately reconciling our differences between groups; two...well let's deal with the first, and let the other reveal itself like a print coming up through the developer.

Our opposition finally agreed to a ceremony of reconciliation--with rigid ground rules. We'd both have roughly the same amount of time: that required to have a vehicle from each group drive by. Then we'd work to prepare the show.

The drivebys ensued, noisy but effective. There followed an hour of feverish activity where displays were built, and immediately evaluated by judges with walkie-talkies, broadcasting to senior citizens of both sexes operating old manual Remingtons.

(They insisted on being included--actually threatening suit--and would hear nothing of computers.) At any rate, the silver brigade toiled so feverishly that the index cards bore several strikeovers, adding, many felt. to the charm and authenticity of the event.

I will refrain from pointing out which group prepared what among the exhibits, since that would mar the purpose of the day; besides, prizes were awarded on individual merit only.

The first honorable mention was labeled TRIPLE CHOCOLATE, the Afro-American subject being posed with a bowl of chocolate

ice cream on his chest, and with that set atop a brown mohair scarf diagonally thrown. The judge's card read *Interesting materials but bowl too small and scarf material oversoft.*

Second honorable mention went to JALEPENO! a red pepper sticking up through a lemon custard in a soup plate between a Hispanic's teenager's legs. *Simplicity! With the merest hint of sexuality.*

(Here I include a non-prizewinner. Perhaps for old time's sake. It was WASP WITH WASPS, a white male wrapped completely round with wire holding fuzzy wasps. *Excellent execution though idea is perhaps a bit trite--too much visible wire also.*

Besides, you lost theme of show!!!! To be fair, a petit four had been hastily thrust into the nest of wires but the judge apparently missed it.)

CHEROKEE JUBILEE took third prize, an American Indian clothed in buckskin, with cherries intertwining both hands. It however contained, the judges said, *too much red, literally and figuratively.*

Second went to BAKED ALASKA, an Eskimo peeking from a cardboard oven, set, according to a round gauge, at 500.

too small on oven therm was the only criticism.

The display meriting both Best of Show and First Place featured a lovely blond in long white silk gown in heart-shaped box lined with a red satin dotted with the candy called nonpareils. *VERY SWEETLY BLOND AND VERY VERY DEAD.*

Beautiful! sang the index card, *echoes of Marlyn and of love. Masking of blood stains topnotch too!* (That it was, and the less said of the other displays on that account, the better.) I should mention also the one the senators most objected to later, WHOM THE GODS DESTROY THEY FIRST MAKE EDIBLE, an oriental baby, heavily talced, in the middle of an angel food cake.

Very tasteful, though baby too large for scale of whole piece. Try again.

The crowd, mostly middle aged, came from all economic strata. They appeared to like the show, although Dr Hiram W. Jackman, retired dean of the junior college, sniffed, "Worst yet when it comes to gilding the lilly, or the flan, or whatever."

My lasting impression is not a critical but an aesthetic one...*sounding now a bit like the ghostly preecho from a phonograph record...*blood whipping across the rough-textured wall outside.

Lips Smooth As Oil

From the balcony of the church, Ted spied the backs of the women seated below, picture hats floating between their shoulder blades. Each had flanked herself with a purse and a grayishwhite praybook. He had gone there, the closest church to his new apartment, to check out the ladies.

Something hit them, they'd splinter, he thought, signing the book passed to him by his pewmates, Dr and Mrs Marius Ohgo. After Ted x'd *newcomer*, writing his old address, the cherubic Dr Ohgo placed a beefy hand on his arm and whispered during a pause in Pastor Carruther's *Psalms Never Before or Seldom Quoted*, "You're to come with us afterwards for cookies. Mrs Ohgo's cookies are closer to heaven than even our seats here." Ted blurred acceptance and Ohgo winked, "From Erie, huh? Well, did you travel from Erie with any?"

Judging from Dr Ohgo's ecstatic smile, Ted's *Pardon?* was just the right answer. Was it his hunger and the talk of cookies made him smell chocolate?

They walked to the Ohgos through falling leaveshe puzzling over Dr Ohgo's bizarre digs at Carruthers while Ted shook the pastor's hand before escaping the church. Now Ohgo, his blowing hair whiter than the weak sunlight, was classifying *love* as Ted studied identicalaspects of the neighborhood's architecture: "...and I love Mrs Ohgo too and her wondrous bakingexemplified by this majestic stomach preceding me everywhereand you'll soon see my other love. And of course, as I said, I love the God encompassing all my loves."

"Well one of your loves is different, MariusI'll grant you that!" rang back Mrs Ohgo from the spinning leaves ahead. She

limped, Ted noticed.

At the huge hall closet, Ted witnessed Dr Ohgo as hanger *meister*, separating clusters of hangers meticulously before plucking out three for their coats. Mrs Ohgo donned her longmileage smile which spoke forbearance; Ted shifted from foot to foot in the vaguely chocolatesmelling air. Once free of her coat she brightened as to a "batch just ready to pop in!" and limped off.

Ohgo shepherded him into the den, first having him close his eyes. Upon opening them Ted perceived smears, pink ones against

thickly varnished knotty pine. He guessed they came from a small fire in the fireplace, but what sprung to focus proved to be large paintings of barebreasted girls in silky boxing shorts and burgundy gloves. One resting on the floor, a taunting blond with eyes of indigo flame, stood taller than Ted, almost as if he could, with some boldness, shake her gloves and wish her luck.

"Did you travel from Erie with any?" squealed Dr Ohgo, his head an immense balloon floating against the knottypine, his white hair flaring in a sudden draft, his face even more scarlet.

"Not with any of these I didn't." "The brassiere is an example of sound engineering but God, my Erie friend, has the touch of an artist," he preached, his eyes intensely green. "Can you imagine it says in Proverbs that *their lips are smooth as oil but their legs go down to hell*? Well their legs are rooted right here, thank you. And make of this beautiful earth even more of a heaven, am I right, Mr Erie? Did you travel here with any? Oh well, if you get it here that's fine too! Would you like to name that one you seem so enamored of? I'd call her that from now on if you did." Ohgo plopped into a director's chair facing the same painting.

"I uh..."

"No matter, tell me after Mrs Ohgo plies you with the other loveliness of the house." Dr Ohgo closed his eyes, knitted his hands across his belly, and sighed periodically until Mrs Ohgo entered some minutes later, ushered by puffs of, of course, chocolate. "Tomorrow, Theodore!" piped up Ohgo, "you'll remember that her cookies don't melt in your mouth, my friend, oh no! They melt your very mouth, Theodore. May I call you Theodore?"

"What did he say, dear?" interrupted Mrs Ohgo.

"That he's very very lonely."

"Well I shouldn't wonder. Isn't a shame we couldn't bring these lovely lovely girls to life?"

She put down the tray of huge mugs splotched a cream and violet. Misshapen from her ceramic class, and primal to Ted as they fumed, they encircled a dish piled with steaming chocolate chip cookies, everything wildly aromatic. "That'd be something all right, having them all here in the flesh: a heaven on earth, my Erie friend! Where it rightly belongs. Seek and ye shall find! I don't believe in heaven as much as I believe in here. I like them when they are ever so so so slightly burntthe cookies not the girlsthe chocolate melts in the air, *becomes* the air, the fragrance *linnnn-gering* for days. *Ahhhhhhh!* By the way, Theodore, butter, as you're finding out by the look of you, is another of Mrs Ohgo's secrets."

...
Sonofabitch is a brick short of a load! is Cliff's conclusion that next afternoon during Ted's phonecall to the Gannon College Library. Did you ever figure what you traveled from here with?

Dr Ohgo informed me that there comes a time when we must forget our baggage or it locks to us, like in the famous logo for *Death of a Salesman*.

Yeah his sons left him babbling in the shithouse while they took off with whores. Sex can make you less than human.

Don't say that!

Hey it was just cookies! We got them here in Erie too! Even the priests eat them.

Hot chocolate too! Double jeopardy! Anyway, you never know what can, uh, start you off.

I'll second thatwe're at a dangerous age. But, Dr and Mrs Marius Ohgo, hey? What's he doctor of? Were the cookies shaped like tits too? I can see their coat of arms: a cross of cookies rampant on a field of breasts. Actually, he sounds like a lot of gabby, ballbreaking priests here, only they're warped by theologyI don't know their positions on breasts and women boxers. But they got one on everything else, that's for sure. Wait a second! Some horny *padre* wants to check out *The Joy of Sex*. How you doing, Father? No problem: he's just checking me out actually.

I swear the spoon stood straight up in the whipped cream.

That was something else.

Elevate your gutter mind, 'cause I have real problems. Anyway, a nut and probably so's the wife and I scarfed in those otherworldly cookies for hours too long while Ohgo prattled on, but what the hell, I don't know anybody down here in Media. Well, didn't before...

Ah hah! My hungry patience will be rewarded! After the pigout, the...?

Well I had catapulted myself to a sugar high, and I figured a lot of black coffee'd calm me down? I had an oat bran muffin too, healthy, at Dunkin Donuts. But then things took an even weirder turn.

"I've been waiting a whole hour! He's a rotten bastard and you're all rot"

"Pardon?"

"And look at *this!*" It's suppose to be fall, pretty colors in the trees and all that shit, you know? And that total *asshole*

on the TV? Makes up poems about the weather? He didn't make up one for this, did he?" Wet snow clumped against the window of Dunkin Donuts, refracting headlights as cars slid into the parking lot.

Look, I told her, I can see that you're upset.

What she say?

Then I must be the most sensitive male in this whole stupid Media, Pennsylvania or words to that effect.

Translation: sucker.

So she asks me for a ride home, but then has to check me out with the help, which is a United Nations of giggling. You know, *Is this guy all right?* They don't know of course.

Toothless Cambodian woman covered in white sugar yells, *Hey take chance, Letty! How you can do worse?*

Look! I told them. I just moved here. I come from Erie. Which was a mistake because one of them, some sort of Hispanic Negro fat girl screams *Erie! Snow up the ass, that's Erie!* Then, of course, my name became SnowUptheAss until we got out of there.

And thus t'will be each and every time you go back, the tool of ridicule being the only one left to the working poor in this great nationlike the gravedigger in *Hamlet*.

Spare me the Sociology. And especially the Literature! First thing she says getting into the car is *No funny business, you understand?* and I say look I want to get home myself, I've had one hell of a strange day! And then she cries and cries for miles and won't tell me how to get to where she lives.

Which is information you'd have to have.

And asks me to stop, asks me questions as to why this guy would stand her up, etc. Maybe alien women got him. We can look for his story at the supermarket checkout.

Whatever. Anyway there we were gazing at the woods, which she had hated just before in the quoteunquote *stupid snow*, and now finds beautiful because God did it and not people.

Uh...the...comforting, uh, gets warmer, and man! Everything

just turns furious. And at the end she cries twice as much and says she's happy because God put us together at the lowest moment of her entire life!

It had been quite a religious day for you. What's she look like?

A boy.

I often thought that about you. Are you sure you know the difference?

Probably hasn't read a book in her life. And everything is immediately emotional! Like, boom, right away. You can't think.

Let me stop you before you get to natural rhythm, you typical little suburban snotnosed snob! but then we already know that.

Look, I don't have time for your ten cent analysis! I seem to...have her now for some reason, and this is the even weirder part: I smelled chocolate at lunchtime from some brat ripping into a Hershey Bar at the 7Eleven and...started getting a hardon.

Well you can't be allowed on the streets like that not good for much but giving directions.

That passes for funny in your sealed sewer of a mind, I know, but...

Food and women! *Mmmmm!* What you got to complain about? Smear her with chocolate and you can die a happy man. Anyway, all those rosy tits at the mysterious and redolent Ohgos, you couldn't reign yourself in. Ah shall I compare thee to a slummer's lay?

It it it it had started as comforting, innocent, uh mostly, and went haywire and now I don't know what the hell I'm doing! We had breakfast this morning before work, but first I picked her up at her place, and...then...before we could get out the door...Wham Bam again! I can't think! And she! She doesn't even bother. I never met a woman quite like this. No substances or bullshit needed. Out of control.

I thought such a condition was devoutly to be wished.

Well it's ripping the shit out of me. I mean this new job, man, with a lot of problems, and that's quite enough to make me nervous, thank you. I have to get down to work and knock off all this happy horseshit. I've got to catch hold and damn soon. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm sitting here now in the middle of about a thousand books they were supposed to inventory before I took over. And I thought Gannon's bookstore was screwed up! Well this is Widener, a university, so it's screwed up big time!

Try the personal inventory first. You're a good guy; you

just have no character.

Get in control you mean, because, like, she's out of it, yes?

Or is it that she's very much in it, *o pale and loitering knight?*

Never mind the fuckin books. It's bad enough I got to peddle them. They're all shit.

... I swear I won't even mention

Letty! But the weather here! Like, Erie has the reputation for lousy...but here it pisses gray mud out of the sky half the week and all of the weekend. It drips clammy gray *inside* your skull. And this is the time my boygirl starts talking about getting serious, quote unquote. I am really not ready to go to the movies with her yeteven though we've gone a bit beyond that in the few months since...but I promised not to talk about her and I'm not...uh...anymore. So! How are all the Literary Lions at Gannon College?

The same pitiful mess, and Nature is without her diadem up here too: we're about fiftyfifty mud and snow from a crazy thaw, but now it's hardening up as we're just now plummeting through zero as I speak. Looks like a grimy abstract out there under the frozen streetlights: how I visualize purgatory.

I'm in it! Shit, I can't love her! Jesus Christ she's just a girlwhich you can hardly tell by looking.

Get her a pair of boxing gloves and some flashy shorts. Or better yet, you're capable of an even more infantile image.

Cliff! Holy Jesus! I haven't had a life yet!

To be serious, Ted, friend, you're having one right now. Who ever said it suppose to consist of big ideas? Ever think that maybe you're lucky?

How can I be lucky and this upset? Cliff! What'll I do? Who knows? Your candle is lit and you're still cursing.

Last night I...sat in a chair and cried!

Yeah we do that sometime. You're no fuckin help!

Trade her even up for Mrs Ohgo. Cookies outlast sex anytime.

...
Ted walks past the Ohgo's, but can't ring the bell. The early evening's bluish fog eats dollops of snow atop skeletal bushes flanking their front door, a buttery mist shoulders under.

Is there another young man in there perched in all that rosiness and aroma? *Did you travel from Trenton with any? From Scranton, Philadelphia? Stockholm? Zaire?* Do you find our fighting blond as overwhelming as did our friend from Erie?

Speaking of Whom! And Ted sees himself in the den,

sputtering

"I had such a nice time, and I 'm I'm I'm thinking of joining the church and had a question or two."

By then standing under a haloed streetlamp, he hears Cliff's voice saying *Belay the conscious phoniness; enough will filter through your depraved personality naturally.*

...
Letty is still there in powderblue fake fur, seated on a milk crate clotted with filthy snow and smoking a cigarette, the knives of her knees wide apart. "Hey Big Shot! I was just getting ready to quit on you! Isn't this where you came in? When I was waiting for another socalled man?"

"I'm sorry. I had to go back to a place."

"What'd she say?"

"It wasn't like that. It was something else. Something I don't understand." "Hmph! That's really overrated, that shit. What's so hot about understanding things anyway? It's what you do before you understand things that counts, and *when* you don't understand them. Who *can't* do things when they understand them?"

"What did you say? I don't under-"

"You heard me but don't understand." She flipped the cigarette away as they got in the car. "Can't. It's okay. You do your best, Snow-Up-the-Ass. That's the name for you all right."

"Well mine for you is sssssScrewball." He started the balky Datsun.

"That's an easy one. For anybody. I never met anybody that one didn't fit."

They parked by a playground. The night had become clear, starlit. His adam's apple and trousers bulged, with tension in between.

"Not tonight--nothing I'm too down," she broke the silence.

"It's probably because..." he began.

"Whoa. Shut up! I don't want you fuckin my mind anymore. And I don't wanna know why anyways. Right now it's just what is."

They stared past the swings and sliding boards of the icy, glimmering, playground, through the pines and into the housing development beyond, the lighted houses like broken grins.

"Well I guess we better...something..." she eventually sobbed. "There's screwing your life away and there's...babies." In the cold she tucked her feet under, making herself smallerhe experienced pity for an instant. "My God! There are so many things we'd have to talk about before...!"

"Hey! You talk! I'll be too old by then. Old woman not that you wouldn't try to screw me even then. Never saw anybody had to have it more. Even that first night I could feel it like nothing in my life ever. Now shut up before you begin to apologize or explain!" She tugged at him to force herself, "Mmmmm" under his arm. "I can't tell you how good you smell! How come you always smell so sweet?"

"Chchchocolate seized me one batty day."

"Yeah! That's what's it's like, a little, chocolate or something."

"And I don't appreciate your characterisation of me as some sort of animal."

"Lighten up, Snow-Up-the-Ass, I'm teasing. Mostly anyways. Hey, with us it was like, instant! Explosion! So? After that? What?"

By way of answer he thrust her back into her own seat, to deliver, with all the rational will he could muster, his farewell speech, laced with the highest sentiments he had ever announced.

At the end tears stood in her eyes like dimes.

...

What an insight! It destroyed me! What I discovered is that what's really really crazy is the domestic shit, that's what's crazy. I thought the way I used to live, the goddamn ravaging, wracking sexual drive and and and the horrible loneliness and the drinking all night and running ten miles the next morning and then puking andand...well, anyway, that's really not what's crazy, really crazy. Crazy is the Ohgos and all the people dying away in their snug little bungalows with all the burners and the ovens cooking, and kids pissing in every bed! It's good I met the Ohgos, 'cause they represent the socalled home in its most insane form. I mean, girls with bbreasts, bboxing while you get fatter and fatter? A domesticated pig? *This I want for my future?*

And and and and women like Letty, offering everything up with this smartass Mona Lisa smile and getting you you you babbling, and then instantly purring *Just step this way to Domestic Death!* Uh uh!

Man I did it! I ended it and I never felt better! Like I'm burning with the feeling! Free, Baby, free!

...

About a month later Cliff had an early dinner at a German Restaurant with a priest who taught philosophy at Gannon, and they argued so long afterwardsthe waitresses huddling and pointing that he barely made closing time at Toppy's Terrific Tuxes. He cast the plastic-sheathed garment into the cancerous

Monte Carlo, fistailed out of boulders of squalid ice, flooring it all the way to Media.

Fish Story

Like other fish--if, as you said, you really wish to learn-- I do not like metaphors. So, as I said, I *am* a fish. It is a hard thing to explain to you: we simply *are*, and therefore need no figures of speech.

As to the current spate of fish suicides, one must discuss the deteriorating mental health of the majority offish since 1982, and even before. I have lost too many of my friends, haddocks, tuna... dolphins being the latest. Unlike those of men, these labels are not meant to prejudice or denigrate. The brotherhood among fish is legendary.

We eat each other you say? We do what is decreed by The Great Fish, no more, no less. Oh there are wilful renegades as everywhere in the animal...kingdom, so-called.

And those of us who kill to eat in the natural order of things don't write books full of circular rhetoric, or make films rationalizing acts of brutality and sexuality--where sometimes the difference between the two is hard to tell. No sleaze, academic or pseudoartistic, among fish.

By the way, I never really found out whether we are included in that lofty designation of *Animal Kingdom* by you and your species--yourown just fits at a certain place in a certain chart like anything else, no better or worse, more complex than some, less so than others--whether you and all your professors know it or not.

We fish have our own ways to classify life but it is both too complex and too intuitive for you to, excuse the expression, fathom.

At any rate, our solidarity all but overwhelms any tiny tiny antisocial percentage among the untold trillions of fish in the waters of this planet. What if I told you there are as many fish as stars!

At any rateback to fish suicidesI have seen it many times,

this decline in the power to think clearly: you do too many unfish things. Then you kill yourself in water full of garbage and medical waste, or they get you with some silly lure, rubbery worm of no natural color which you would have laughed at, herky-jerking by in your strong and healthy and clear-thinking days.

Hook you! I know you habitually say some such taunting thing, slightly different and probably just as sick. Well just think of yourself with a hook through your cheek. And yet such horror is not given a second thought.

I told aálobster "You know, they say that when they plunge you into boiling water you don't feel much, your nerves being so primitive." That's what I told him. He cried and cried. I guess that doesn't take much sensitivity. Of course I know that the image of a lobster crying is ludicrous beyond ludicrous to you. Not dreamt of in your philosophy.

I won't go on. I ask only that you merely attempt to look at it from our side. Just this once. Oh if you could only be a fish for one luminous, cutting second!

ORANGE, GEORGEOUS ORANGE!

Not the kind of den you'd expect to see a Pumpkinhead in, club-like with its leather furniture, cherry paneling, the massive desk bathed in lamplight. But a glance from outside at the leaded windows which sectioned the huge orange head immediately confirmed the unusual fact to any passerby this early evening.

A Pumpkinhead absolutely! And not surrounded by filth and greasy formica. (Thus perhaps the "good one" that many people know or have heard of.)

He laughed, this comfortably ensconced creature with the creamy French Telephone so tiny next to his head, for he had solved the math problem just before the eminent physicist on the other end of the line could blurt the answer. Unfortunately though, before the Pumpkinhead could invent a discreet goodbye and place the ornate phone in its cradle, Dr. Lyle Anders quipped "Now don't get too giddy. Or I'll start thinking you're a Pumpkinhead. Which, of course, would be imposs..." Then the immediate, seething intake of breath at the professor's end in Ann Arbor when the mechanical operator broke in with "Are you a Pumpkinhead?"

"The Supreme Court has ruled that Pumpkinheads have the samerights as..." he cried. It was no use--the question just kept repeating. "Yes," he finally whispered. The court, he knew, had also ruled that the question alone established the fact in these cases, since no one not a Pumpkinhead would claim to be one, and, as Pumpkinheads were compulsive liars, ninety-nine percent of them would immediately answer no. (The latest study from Johns Hopkins University put the figure at ninety-seven percent--"not a significant difference."

Also, those persons unjustly asked could not sue, for the court recently held that questions absurd on their face cannot *per se* be injurious.)

Now another evasion took care of those guaranteed Pumpkinhead "rights": "All outgoing lines are full; all incoming..."

He quickly hung up and then depressed his computer button only to see that R.Renfew, Pasco, WA was undertaking the half-completed chess game against Dr. Anders. The Pumpkinhead started to say that it didn't take Dr. Anders long to get him out of memory, but he remembered that it didn't take anyone very long the many times before this one either. "Oh well," he breathed into the soft, warm atmosphere of the den, "I can at least put my 'Begging Clown Bit' on hold."

And all of his signs insisting ORANGE POWER, and WE ARE THE LIGHT YOU HAVE SEEN! plus all the framed photos of Pumpkinhead

surgeons and basketball players brought no solace--once again. He shook his huge head and whispered "There are more jokes about Pumpkinhead basketball players than there are Pumpkinheads, period!" It was getting darker outside and the light from his desk lamp flowed more brightly, brushing the faintest gold over the dark paneling, and making each individual pane in the large window reflect bright orange. He mused sadly as to what the nervous ticketseller must have seen when he led eleven others of his despised ilk to pick up reservations for PHANTOM OF THE OPERA. "Aren't you Pumpkinheads?" she sobbed. The manager stepped in with "I think we can safely assume they are, and that this performance is completely, utterly sold out."

He clicked off his lamp and wept into the mellow darkness.

The Chastetree

Jane. Strolling the tanbark path down into the nature center, half wondering why she had ended up there for her "solo"--and a day tardy because of Dr Kasman's muddled assignment list. At any rate, she was expected to fetch something foggily symbolic of herself for his "Seminar In Personal Rediscovery." A leaf? she thought, a twig? Dogshit?

Just before a campus policeman began running towards her, she'd been musing that nothing connected in that class--oh to be sure, on purpose, as Dr Kasman had assailed them: "Clusters of intuitions and images, or sounds, memories. Whatever. Odors even! Let's accept such clusters without generalizing about

them, or without narrowing them to the meaning, and, therefore, to the preconceptions, ah, inherent in everything."

Uh huh. Odors all right. Is that Dr Kasman or Gasman? She very nearly said this last aloud. It made no difference because the officer had vanished. "Probably steered offcourse by a case of Bud Light empties in the Japonica," she laughingly pronounced.

Patrolman Ridgeway, though, craned from behind an oak, thrusting down a photocopied ***ALERT***! describing a Blond Caucasian of yesterday who had stepped from Crum Creek, naked, to invite somedawdling coed to "experience a dip with me." Ridgeway snatched back the sheet and shook it at Jane in the green light. "Never walk in here alone. Never! No time is safe."

"If women can't walk anywhere alone they might as well be men," she informed the quizzical Officer Ridgeway. "Take a dip huh? How was his dip stick?" she muttered. "Let's get a look at yours--you never know." Jane.

"Ma'm?" the tall officer questioned, the oak looming behind him.

"Oh nothing," she smiled. "I prefer not to narrow myself to meaning...a la Dr Gasman...in case I thereby find out what's wrong with me and the entire sick country. As to you and me, I'll just take our bizarre rendezvous with its surrounding odors, birdsongs, and bawdy titillation back to the strange doctor's class--or is bawdy titillation redundant, officer? Was Bawdy Titillation covered in the Police Academy? Under Lascivious Behaviours, general? And where does it fit in the scheme or non-scheme of existence anyway? Is it...is it slime or paradigm?"

Ridgeway grimaced wryly, being used to fresh students all right...but this little muttering one now wheeling around through the dapples...? The worst yet. He blinked as she disturbed the light.

Double-checking survey results with her that last evening in his messy office, Dr Kasman had spoken of the pleasure of her company in a voice that hardly moved the air, that air where others of his hints had breathed softly and died, like decaying notes from a flood-damaged piano--actually breathed so softly and died so quickly that she couldn't be absolutely certain she heard anything at all. She was soshortly out of the convent that she wasn't sure that she could recognize, let alone encourage, masculine attention.

But there really is no one else, small voice or large , she concluded when reaching an enclosed space called the Garden of Fragrances. Oh they'll arrest the erect Caucasian so he'll

not proposition me. She sang this last in a Gilbert and Sullivan style, adding "oh no he'll not, no no he'll not. And there's the--I say there's the-- there's the pity! " She kicked up the lid of a small box holding brochures describing the garden, plucked one out.

Sitting on a bench Jane read the list of plants, skipping the introduction while saying "What does anyone mean among these damn academics anyway? The ambivilancies come in thickets!" Sweet allyssum she misread as sweet asylum, immediately catching her error--and then aching in the ripe aromas, too suddenly, for the convent.

Oh well, I'll pray about it...all the confusion now. But I'll never go back: obliged to leave that clarity and simplicity, or cease breathing--no matter about my prayers.

But, no, no, she wouldn't pray now, about that or anything--so turned off for the present, and onto nothing else, certainly not academic obscurity, and hints and whispers a la Dr Kasman.

That pussy! God how pukingly sexist *that* word is! A cowardly man is a woman's... Oh they would of course pussy *foot* in Linguistics and say that the slang takes from pussy cat also. At any rate I'm sick to death of my pussy and its supposed needs. Stop saying pussy, you pussy! Give me a break! Everybody! I could, though, urgently love Officer Ridgeway for his straight-ahead style--all nuance a stranger to him. "Like women with the rag on," he might say in response to the slightest deviation from Victorian female behavior. Half the universe with the rag on--now there's a thought. "Chastetree" she read aloud from the brochure.

"I do prefer the vulgar somewhat..." here she used the weeping silver linden to stand in for Dr Kasman..."it being blunt where you are mincing. If you could say something , well then I trust myself to spontaneously and honestly answer. One can say, for instance, coffee? movie? dinner? destroy a bed? One can say anything! That's the beauty of saying. So say! All tiny talk is impotence, all half-wisecracks impotence--of both sexes, much as I'm in a men-blasting mood. So, too, is my own watery little bawdiness. Why the very air itself expects more of us. God--if there is one--does! But so, she sighed, had her former religious life been impotent. What she thought humility, simple timidity: afraid. Afraid to live either in or out of the convent. And fooling no one who knew her and could easily note her gradual coming-apart. Oh why do we all of us choose to spoil our lives in such a way? Quiet desperation , Thoreau said. Or do we choose?

Better an open rebuke than a secret love --isn't that in

Psalms somewhere, Dr Kasman? Or are you so secularly tight-assholed an academic that you'd scorn the Bible too? Maybe the text isn't quite accurate enough for you yet, its provenance lost in Providence--at Brown University, heh heh. All my dreary intellectual shit aside, I really might deal you an open rebuke, Dr Kasman. And I might not. What did one of those tough guys say in *The Killers*? It's something you never know at the time. Is spontaneity a vain hope in all stifling atmospheres--convents and universities and infinities upon wretched infinities of moribund businesses in this overwhelming bore of a country?

What am I doing here on this garden bench? Oh the smells are truly truly wonderful, that's for sure! And what was I doing there in the woods? *Lovely, dark, and deep!* I don't even know, really. And why did I leave? The woods or the convent? I thought I had reasons at the time. Faded. Forgotten. Mother Superior's firm sympathy then; Officer Ridgeway's ludicrous "Caucasian" alarm now.

Jane decided that she'd have to return to the nature center, parry this latest cowardice at least. Once again on the tanbark trail all is very silent, nearly as sealed as the convent, just the sporadic twitter of birds, but soon the officer shadows Jane on the ridge above, resembling a spavined dog against the smudges on the sky. He hears, or sniffs, something, and instantly straightens up. A wave of rain whips through and is gone.

She improvises, giggling: Now rigid on the ridge is he/erect to possibility./ Say!/Ridgeway!/Bring it down here for a poke/and I'll fuck you till your eyes smoke./ Insane!/ Signed, Jane.

A fragment in Kasman's office swims in against the present damp fertility, her telling him what he later designated as her vision! of the survey results: "One-third liked what they liked; one-third hated what they hated; one-third had little idea of anything." "O pray, which third are you, Officer Ridgeway? My father, Sir, was a whole man! I loved him in his young photograph, his face the very sun itself! Now I just have that reticulated picture, that's all, no matter what the fuckin sentimentalists say! He's dead! Period! And love for me is stone cold dead! Why mince around the truth? Oh there'll be plenty of Dr Kasmans, some shy, some pukingly aggressive.

But nothing ever to touch me, to really enter."

Both have been moving, separately though absurdly: Jane sliding on the fragrant grass and yelling, Officer Ridgeway Z-ing down the slope in response to her apparent alarm. Jane stops, her shoes tilted down into mud, but manages to extract,

and then run away before the officer can catch her.

Back at the Garden of Fragrances she writes a letter to her father along the margins of the brochure with her left, or non-dominant hand, as Dr Kasman had, this one blessed time, specifically assigned. She interrupts this laborious task, intrigued for a moment with the names therein which she recites mantra-like. "California incense cedar juniper Himalayan sarcococca fragrant viburnum yellowwood saucer magnolia Japanese Snowbell sweetshrub burkwood daphne fothergilla roseshell azalea Virginia sweetspire reeves skinnia white Chinese wisteria allium snowdrops grape hyacinth Siberian squill sweetbay magnolia weeping silver linden glossy avelia buttefflybush harlequin glory-bower summersweet clethra waxmrytle bee balm catmint silver edged thyme katsura calamintia.

"Chastetree chastree chastree," she ends, chanting and crying. Then in some uncanny atmospheric sorcery, lightning-crossed darkness clamps over the courtyard, each leaf and flower instantly black, and then splendidly phosphorescent. Jane, all but leaping from her skin in the electricity, manages to utter what she had inscribed in her little girl's printing as the brochure is gently taken as she rises from the bench,

revolves in the center of a resonant golden shell where a vortex of petals makes the air a delicious cream

to the Blond Caucasian, his smooth body dazzling, his long hair webbing her face: "I'll swim with you Daddy."